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IV.—“TO BITE THE DUST” AND SYMBOLICAL
LAY COMMUNION.

The Spanish scholar, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who has of late been engaged in the work of resurrecting Spanish epic matter of the Middle Ages, has several times called attention to a curious form of lay communion recorded in certain traditions examined by him. Thus, in the tragic account of the seven Infantes of Lara which we find in the chronicle called the *Estoria de los Godos*, it is stated that the seven brothers, before beginning their last sad battle, “gave communion and confessed all their sins, one to another” (*comulgaron e confesaron todos sus pecados unos á otros*). On this passage Menéndez Pidal comments as follows (*Leyenda de los Infantes de Lara*, Madrid, 1896, p. 36): “This sort of priestly function, which, in default of clergy, relatives exercised one for another, was a very orthodox doctrine for the minstrels (*juglares*), and it even existed as a real custom during the Middle Ages.”¹ He cites the noted instance in

¹ “Esta especie de sacerdocio que ejercían entre sí los parientes á falta de clérigos, era doctrina muy ortodoxa para los juglares; y aun existía realmente en las costumbres durante la Edad Media.”

the chanson de geste *Aliscans*, according to which Count William not only heard the confession of his dying nephew, Vivian, but also gave him by way of communion some "*pain benoît*," which the Count is said to have brought with him in his scrip (vv. 826 ff.). For other Old French examples of this lay administration of the most august of sacraments, Menéndez Pidal refers to Leon Gautier, *La chevalerie* (Paris, 1890, pp. 44 ff.), where, in fact, no few are mentioned, in all of which, however, the species of the communion is symbolical, being either grass or leaves.

Menéndez thinks that the symbolical form of communion is likewise present in a passage of the Spanish *Crónica general* (ed. Ocampo, f. 392 d), which narrates that a certain alcaide of Aguilar fell to the ground about to die, "but that he first took communion of earth and commended his soul to God" (*pero que comulgo ante de la tierra e encomendose su alma a Dios*). Returning to the subject in his investigation of another Old Spanish legend, that of the Abbot Don Juan of Montemayor (*La leyenda del Abad Don Juan de Montemayor*, Dresden, 1903, p. xxvi), Menéndez sees a veiled allusion to the symbolical practice in a description in the 1562 chapbook of a sally made by the besieged followers of the Abbot upon their Moorish enemies. Before issuing from their tower, the Christians, says the chapbook (*Leyenda del Abad*, etc., p. 47, ll. 11 ff.), "gave peace one to another and gave communion and pardon one to another, in order that God might pardon them" (*diéronse paz los unos a los otros y comulgaron y perdonaronse los unos a los otros, porque Dios perdonasse a ellos*). Menéndez is probably right in supposing that the reference here and in the passage of the *Estoria de los Godos* is to communion by earth, although the fact is not explicitly stated, as it is in the case of the alcaide of Aguilar. Another Old Spanish document, the *Poema de Alfonso XI* (cf. the uneritical edition in the *Biblio-*

teca de autores españoles, vol. 57) has the particular practice clearly set forth. It describes the advance of a Christian army toward the mountains where it is to engage a Saracen force, and states that before the conflict the Christians took communion of earth.

Stz. 1546. *Yuanse contra la sierra. . . .*

1547. E pues que se llegauan,
Ponian su avenencia,
En las bocas se besauan,
En sennal de penitencia.
1548. Salue Rexina yuan rresando,
Ricos omnes e infançones,
De la tierra comulgando,
Caualleros e peones.
1549. Arcobispos e frades
Dauan muy grandes perdones,
E obispos e abades,
Todos fasian orações.

What is truly remarkable in this case is—as Menéndez points out—the fact that the communion of earth is practised even though there are archbishops, bishops, abbots and friars in the army.

While earth is the matter of the communion mentioned in at least two early Spanish documents, grass figures in one important work, the *Gran Conquista de Ultramar* (*Biblioteca de autores españoles*, vol. 44, p. 302), which belongs to the 14th century, if not to the latter part of the 13th. But the *Gran Conquista* is indebted for most of its material to French and Provençal sources,¹ and the use of grass in

¹Cf. G. Paris, *La Chanson d'Antioche provençale et la Gran Conquista de Ultramar*, in the *Romania*, xvii, 513; xix, 562; xxii, 345: G. Baist, *Spanische Literatur* in Groeber's *Grundriss der romanischen Philologie*, II, Abt. 2, p. 415: E. Gorra, *Lingua e letteratura spagnuola* (Milan, 1898), p. 311. The whole episode in the *Gran Conquista* parallels closely one in the Old French poem, *Les Chétifs*, which, like the *Gran Conquista*, is concerned with the Crusades and the story of the Knight of the Swan; cf. L. Gautier, *Bibliographie des chansons de geste* (Paris, 1897), pp. 76–77.

the incident in question is doubtless due to those sources. Chapter CCXXXVI of the *Gran Conquista* is concerned with a duel between the knight Ricarte de Caumonte and the Turk Sorgales de Valgris, in which the Christian prevails over his antagonist. The latter abjures the religion of Mahomet, and makes a confession of faith in the God of Christians, whereupon Ricarte baptizes him and gives him communion of a piece of grass, which he breaks into three pieces, just as the priest does the consecrated host on the altar. After this ceremony, the Christian knight, weeping bitterly, cuts off the Turk's head at the latter's request. As the passage is decidedly of interest in that it gives a reason for the administration of *three* pieces of grass, it may be quoted here. “Estonces Ricarte tomó el yelmo, que yacia en el campo, é fuése para el rio, que era muy cerca, é trájolo lleno de agua, é bendijolo de parte de Dios é santiguólo, é echólo á Sorgales por somo de la cabeza, é despues tomó una hoja de yerba e santiguóla, e hizola tres partes, como los clérigos hacen la hostia sobre el altar cuando consagran el cuerpo de Dios, e dióla al turco, é comióla en razon de comunión, como hace el clérigo el cuerpo de Dios en la misa, é todo esto hacia Sorgales con buena voluntad é con buena fe; é despues que la pasó, dijo á Ricarte que le cortase la cabeza con la espada, ca no queria jamás vivir en este mundo un dia cumplido por quanto habia en él,” etc.

Now, this symbolical form of communion, with its assumption of sacerdotal powers on the part of laymen, when no clergyman could administer the real sacrament or otherwise officiate, was certainly, as Menéndez Pidal states, a mediaeval custom, and it must have enjoyed considerable vogue, if we may judge by the evidence afforded by other literatures, especially by French, German, and Italian.

Nearly sixty years ago, W. Wackernagel, in a brief article published in the *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum*, VI (1848),

288–9, under the caption *Erde der Leib Christi*, listed instances of the custom as he found it recorded for French literature in the *Roman de Roncevaux*, for German literature in the *Meier Helmbrecht*, the *Eckenlied*, the *Rubenschlacht*, the *Wolfdietrich*, and the *Frauendienst*, and for Italian literature in one of the tales in the *Pecorone*. It was Wackernagel's idea that this custom, thus made clear for so large a part of Europe, was a survival of an old pagan belief that the Earth was made from the body of a giant god, a belief which was now brought into relations with the Christian doctrine of the Eucharist. Having stated this theory, he put the query : “Are the expressions *mordre la poudre* or *la poussière* and *ins Gras beiszen*, both of which denote a violent death, to be referred to this Christianized pagan custom ?”¹ The French and German expressions quoted by Wackernagel are, of course, equivalent in force to the English saying, *to bite the dust (ground)*.

Some seven or eight years after the appearance of Wackernagel's article, his views were echoed by E. L. Rochholz in the latter's *Schweizersagen aus dem Aargau* (Aargau, 1856, vol. II, p. xlviii). “For the pagan,” said Rochholz, “the Earth was created from the flesh of a primordial divine being ; it was the body of God, and the pagan, when threatened by imminent death in battle or by murder, ate bits of earth that he had picked up : herein is the origin of the expression *die Erde küssen, ins Gras beissen, mordre la poudre, la poussière.*”²

¹ “Sind die redensarten *mordre la poudre* oder *la poussière* und *ins gras beiszen*, die beide einen gewaltsamen tod bezeichnen, auf diese heidnisch-christliche sitte zurückzuführen ?” For this and some other references I am under obligations to Professor G. L. Kittredge.

² “Dem Heiden ist die Erde aus dem Fleische eines göttlichen Urwesens geschaffen, der Leib Gottes, er asz sogar die aufgegriffenen Erdbrotsamen, wenn ihm durch Kampf oder Mord schnelles Sterben drohte ; daher stammt der Ausdrück *die Erde küssen, ins Gras beissen, mordre la poudre, la poussière.*”

Wackernagel's theory drew the attention also of J. W. Wolf, who took it up in his *Beiträge zur deutschen Mythologie*, II, 396. Predicating the mythological importance of the Earth, Wolf says: "As the Earth was supposed to be the flesh of the divine primordial giant, it was necessarily holy, and we find almost the same beliefs attached to it as to the other three elements."¹ He cites Wackernagel's instances as showing the esteem of sanctity in which the Earth was held, but to the query whether the expressions "mordre la poudre," etc., may not refer to the Christianized pagan belief he responds: "Possibly so; but they may also refer to the convulsive opening and shutting of the mouth with which we meet in dying persons, and which we note particularly on the battlefield in the death agony of men expiring as the result of severe wounds."²

With this last view of Wolf's, I. V. Zingerle agreed in an article entitled "*Ins Gras beissen*" (*Germania*, IV (1859), III-3). To his mind *ins Gras beissen*, *mordre la poudre*, etc., "have nothing to do with the Christianized pagan custom of the Middle Ages, but signify the convulsive catching with the mouth at the clod of earth or grass, as happens with dying men on the battlefield. Both the thing and its signification," he continues, "we find in the ancient classics."³

¹ "Da die erde als das fleisch des göttlichen urriesen galt . . . , musste sie heilig sein und wir finden fast dieselben glauben an sie geknüpft, wie an die andern drei elemente."

² "Das wäre möglich, es könnte aber auf das krampfhafte öffnen und schlieszen des mundes gehn, welches wir oft bei sterbenden finden, namentlich aber auf dem schlachtfeld im todeskampf der an schweren wunden verscheidenden antreffen."

³ "Die obenerwähnten Ausdrücke haben auf den heidnisch-christlichen Gebrauch des Mittelalters keinen Bezug, sondern bezeichnen das krampf-hafte Erfassen der Scholle oder des Grases mit dem Munde, wie es bei Sterbenden auf dem Schlachtfelde vorkommt. Die Sache und ihre Bezeichnung finden wir schon bei den alten Classikern."

Zingerle proceeds to enumerate Greek and Latin examples of the same sayings. Thus he mentions :

Iliad, II, 418.

δδάξ λαζοίατο γαῖαν
xi, 749 ; xix, 61 ; xxiv, 737.
δδάξ Ελον οῦδας
xxii, 16.
γαῖαν δδάξ εἰλον

Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 1423.

γαῖαν δδάξ ἐλόντες

Vergil, *Aeneid*, XI, 418.

Procubuit moriens, et humum semel ore momordit.

Ovid, *Meta.*, IX, 60.

Tum denique tellus
Pressa genu nostro est ; et arenas ore momordi.

The situation as now outlined throws into relief two opposing views : the one, that the undoubted mediæval custom of taking earth (or grass or leaves) as a symbolical species of communion was a survival of a pagan tradition and that the sayings “mordre la poudre (poussière),” “ins Gras beiszen,” etc., are related thereto ; the other, that the medieval custom is in no way connected with these sayings, which, in point of fact, merely describe the death agonies of a man and are easily paralleled by Greek and Latin expressions denoting the same thing. As the result of our examination, the second of these views must seem the more plausible. At the same time, it is probably true that the sayings, both ancient and modern, are more metaphorical than realistic in their bearing.¹

¹ That is, the ancient sayings started as descriptive of a real situation, and then developed the purely metaphorical sense. Cf. J. H. J. Koeppen, *Erklärende Anmerkungen zu Homers Ilias* (Hannover, 1820), gloss to II. II, 418 :—“δδάξ λαζοίατο γαῖαν, dasz sie die Erde mit den Zähnen ergreifen beiszen möchten. Die Alten fochten zwar mit gewaltiger Muth, dasz sie aber beim Niederstürzen in die Erde beiszen, kommt nicht davon allein : es war natürlich. So beiszt einer in die Lanze, *Ilias*, v, 75. Es gleicht unserm ins Gras beiszen. In Homer ist diese alte Sprache schon zur poetischen geworden,” etc.

Abandoning for the moment our discussion of the sayings, whose history, it may be admitted, is not a little obscure, let us confine our attention to some known records of the mediæval custom. We have seen that, apart from the borrowed instance in the *Gran Conquista*, the Spanish custom consisted in partaking of earth. This is true of the German and Italian cases, too, but, on the other hand, the many French cases speak only of the eating of grass or leaves, except in the very surprising instance in the chanson de geste *Aliscans*. According to the poet of the *Aliscans*, Count William arrives on the battlefield and finds his nephew Vivian lying there apparently dead. The boy revives, however, and there ensues the scene of his confession and communion described in these verses of the Guessard and Montaignon edition (*Anciens poètes de la France*, Paris, 1870, pp. 25 ff.):

“ Niés, dist Guillaumes, dites moi vérité
 Se tu avois pain benoît usé
 Au diemence, ke prestres eust sacré ? ” . . .
 Dist Viviens : “ Je n'en ai pas gosté.” . . .
 A s' amosniere mist Guillaumes sa main,
 Si en traist fors de son benoît pain
 Ki fu sainés sor l'autel Saint Germain.
 Or dist Guillaumes : “ Or te fai bien certain
 De tes pecchiés vrai confès aparmain.
 Je suis tes oncles, n'as ore plus prochain,
 Fors Dameieu, le [verai soverain] ;
 En lieu de Dieu serai ton capelain,
 A cest bautesme vuel estre ton parin,
 Plus vos serai ke oncles ne germain.”
 Dist Viviens : “ Sire, molt ai grant fain
 Ke vos mon cief tenés dalés [vo] sain,
 En l'onour Dieu me donés de cest pain,
 Puis [me] morrai ore endroit aparmain.” . . .
 Dont se commence l'enfes à confesser ;
 Tot li gehi, n'i laissa ke conter . . .
 “ Niés, dist Guillaumes, ne vous estuet douter.”
 A icest mot li fait le pain user,
 En l'onour Dieu en son cors avaler . . .

L'ame s'en va, n'i puet plus demorer.
 En paradis le fist Diex hosteler,
 Aveuc ses angles entrer et abiter.¹

The *Aliscans* incident is extraordinary, if, as is thought by Gautier,² the *pain benoît* administered by William was

¹ Cf. also *Aliscans mit Berücksichtung von Wolframs von Eschenbach Willehalm*, kritisch herausgegeben von G. Rolin (Leipzig, 1894, vv. 839 ff.).

² Cf. Gautier, *La chevalerie*, p. 807, s. v. Communion. “Dans le fascicule ix de ses *Études d'histoire et de bibliographie*, Mgr. Haigneré conteste le sens que nous avons attribué au ‘benoit pain—Ki fu saines sur l'autel saint Germain,’ et avec lequel le comte Guillaume, sur le champ de bataille d'*Aliscans*, fait faire la première communion à son neveu Vivien. [Cf. Gautier's earlier pronouncement on this subject in his edition of the *Chanson de Roland*, note to verse 2023 : “Dans *Aliscans* la communion de Vivien est réellement sacramentelle ; Guillaume, par un étonnant privilège, a emporté avec lui une hostie consacrée, et c'est avec cette hostie qu'il console et divinise les derniers instants de son neveu.”] Il s'agissait, suivant nous, d'une communion vraiment eucharistique : mais Mgr. Haigneré n'est pas de cet avis : ‘Ce que Guillaume, dit-il, tire de son aumônière et dépose sur les lèvres de Vivien déjà blanchies par la mort, c'est tout simplement, comme le trouvère le nomme à deux reprises, du pain bénit.’ Nous avons d'abord estimé qu'il y avait de graves présomptions en faveur de la thèse de Mgr. Haigneré ; mais deux textes, l'un du *Covenans Vivien*, l'autre d'*Aliscans*, semblent nous donner décidément raison. Dans le *Covenans*, Vivien lui-même s'écrie au moment d'entrer dans la bataille : ‘Mea à Deu pri le Pere tot puissant—Que de cest siecle ne soie deviant—Q'aie parlé à Guillaume le franc,—De l' *saint cors* Deu soie communiant’ (v. 1565–68). Même précision dans *Aliscans*, et cela dans le récit du même épisode. Quand Guillaume trouve Vivien mort, il s'écrie : ‘Las ! que ne ving tant com il fu vivant.—De l' *pain* que j'ai fu acomenianz,—*De l'verai cors Damledeu par covant.*’ (*Aliscars*, v. 804–806).—Il convient d'observer qu'alors même qu'il s'agirait seulement de pain bénit, l'acte de Vivien pourrait, sans trop d'inexactitude, être appelé une première communion. Les eulogies ou le pain bénit étaient entourées par nos pères d'un respect aussi grand que l'eucharistie elle-même, et ‘l'on exigeait pour les recevoir une disposition à peu près analogue à celle qui est nécessaire pour s'approcher de la sainte communion’ (*Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la théologie catholique* de Wetzer et Welte, art. *Eulogies*).”

To a friend, the Rev. C. F. Aiken of the Catholic University of Washington, I am indebted for the following additional information. “The passage in *Aliscans* has doubtless reference to the ancient practice of administering holy communion by pious laymen. In early times they were allowed to

really the sacred Host of the eucharistic sacrament. It is not unreasonable to suppose, however, that it was nothing more than a eulogia, that is, a piece of bread blest by the priest at the altar, but not consecrated as in the eucharist, so that the doctrine of Transubstantiation does not apply to it, and it may pass through lay hands. The eulogia is still termed *pain bénit* in French and the ceremony of blessing and distributing it to the faithful may still be witnessed in churches in France and a few other parts of Catholic Christendom. It may have been mere poetic exaggeration that prompted the author of the *Aliscans* in another verse (806) to speak of the bread which William had with him as the “*verai cors Damledeu*,” the real body of the Lord God. Yet the whole subject may be debatable. Of one point, notwithstanding, there can be no doubt: the usual matter of the communion is for the French epic poets grass or foliage,

take it to the absent ones at home, even to take it with them on long journeys and voyages. Lay administering of communion was forbidden by Hincmar in the Council of Paris in 829, also by Leo IV in the same century. But as late as the 12th century the councils held at Rome and at London allowed pious laymen to administer communion in cases of urgent need. See Corblett, *Histoire du sacrement de l'eucharistie*, vol. I, p. 286.” For a further note on the persons duly empowered to administer communion, see Addis and Arnold, *A Catholic Dictionary* (London, 1884), s. v. *Communion*. Among other things it is there stated that “In times of persecution, the faithful took the Blessed Sacrament away with them, so that even women gave themselves communion at home (Tertullian, *Ad Uxor.*, II, 5). Ordinarily, the deacons conveyed the Holy Communion to the sick, but sometimes even laymen did so (Euseb., *H. E.* vi, 44). Pius V, in modern times, is said to have allowed Mary Queen of Scots to receive communion from her own hands in prison (Billuart, *De Euch. diss.* VII, a. 3).” See Cardinal Wiseman’s novel of early Christian times, *Fabiola*, chapter XXII of Part Second, in which even a young acolyte is described as carrying the Viaticum to administer it to others: cf. *Ibid.* chapter XXXIII, and see also the *Life of J. T. Vénard*, translated by Lady Herbert, for a recent instance of lay transmission of the Eucharist. A modern reference to the mediæval symbolical communion is seen in J. H. Shorthouse’s novel, *Sir Percival* (cf. *Dublin Review*, 121, 80).

the administration of which is usually preceded by a confession made by the dying man to some layman present, just as happens here in the case of Vivian.

With regard to confession as part of the ceremony Gautier (*La chevalerie*, pp. 43 ff.) remarks: “On the eve of a battle the knights went in eager quest of a priest. If they did not find one, they accosted their nearest of kin, in the thick of the fray, took him aside and confessed to him. In default of a relative, a friend or companion in arms sufficed.

. . . . History and legend agree in presenting to us the spectacle of these confessions to a layman, the practice of which persisted until quite late. Bayard, at the point of death, humbly confesses to his steward ‘for lack of a priest’” (cf. *Le loyal serviteur*, ed. of the *Société de l'histoire de France*, p. 418). What Gautier says is borne out by the Old French epics and is corroborated by the Rev. Walter Sylvester in an essay styled “The Communions, with Three Blades of Grass, of the Knights-Errant” (in the *Dublin Review*, vol. 121, 1897, pp. 94 ff.). This latter writer quotes beside the example of Bayard another one taken from a really historical account, namely, from de Joinville’s *Histoire de Saint Louis* (cf. ed. by de Wailly, Paris, 1874, p. 195), and recalls the fact that, during the rage of the Black Death in England (1348–9), the Bishop of Bath empowered laymen and even women to hear the confession of persons *in articulo mortis*.¹ The value of the lay confession commended

¹ Cf. also J. Dunlop, *History of Prose Fiction* (London, 1896, a new ed. by H. Wilson), vol. I, p. 284, note, and *The Tablet* (London, 1886), vol. xxxv of the New Series, p. 98 and p. 258. The second of these notes in *The Tablet* is in the form of a letter from a correspondent in Jersey City Heights, N. J. It cites on the subject the authority of St. Alphonsus and of Benedict XIV, and appends this very recent example: “I remember hearing from the late Bishop Lynch of Charleston of a Confederate officer (a convert to the faith), who was mortally wounded in one of the battles around Richmond, and confessed to a fellow soldier—who, by the way, was

itself to two of the great theologians of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard, who enjoin it in extreme cases, when a priest is not at hand ; cf. *Summa S. Thomae Aquinatis*, Supp. III. Partis, Quaest. VIII, art. 2, and *Petri Lombardi Sententiarum Libri IV* (Louvain, 1568), Lib. iv, dist. 17, E. As Old French epic instances of confession to a layman, Gautier mentions such typical cases as the two in *Raoul de Cambrai* (ed. Le Glay), in which Bernier, about to die, called Savari and confessed to him “because there was not time enough to get a priest,” and Aleaume confessed his sins to two knights for a similar reason. Many other records of such confessions might be given here, but for our purpose it is sufficient to say that this unburthening of the soul is an implied preliminary to the symbolical communion.

THE OLD FRENCH INSTANCES.

Let us pass in review the Old French epic examples of communion by means of grass or foliage.¹

In the *Chanson d'Antioche* (ed. P. Paris, II, p. 235) Rainaus de Tor partakes of three bits of grass :

De l'erbe devant lui a-il trois peus rompus,
En l'oneur Dieu les use.

Raoul de Cambrai (ed. Le Glay, p. 95) : many take communion of three bits of grass :

mains gentix hom s'i acumenia
De trois poux d'erbe, qu'autre prestre n'i a.

Ibid. (p. 327) : Savari, after hearing Bernier's confession, administers three leaves of a tree to him :

not even a Catholic—with injunction to repeat his confession to a priest, saying that he did this because he felt a natural inclination to unburden his mind and hoped for the grace of a perfect contrition.”

¹ On these examples cf. Gautier, *La chevalerie* (Paris, 1890), pp. 43 ff. ; Id., *La Chanson de Roland* (15th ed.), note to v. 2023 ; Id., *Les épopées françaises* (2nd ed.), tome III, p. 324 ; Rev. W. Sylvester, O. S. C., *The Communions, with Three Blades of Grass, of the Knights-Errant*, in *The Dublin Review*, vol. 121, pp. 80 ff.

Trois fuelles d'arbre maintenant li rompi
Si les resut per corpus Domini.

Li romans de Garin le Loherain (ed. P. Paris, II, p. 240) : Bègue de Belin, about to die, communicates of three leaves of grass :

Trois foilles d'erbe a pris entre ses piés ;
 Si les conjure de la vertu del' ciel.
Por corpus Deu les reçut volentiers.

Élie de Saint-Gilles (ed. G. Raynaud, vv. 244-5) : Élie administers a leaf of a tree to a dying knight :

Prist une fuelle d'erbe, à la bouce li mist.
 Dieu li fit aconnoistre et ses peciés jehir.

Les Chétifs (ed. C. Hippéau, II, p. 209) : a defeated Saracen, Murgalé, abjures his false religion, and receives baptism and communion of a bit of grass divided into three parts from his Christian conqueror, Richard de Chaumont, who, then, at his request, cuts off his head :

Puis a pris .i. poil d'erbe et en .III. le parti.
 Puis le bailla au Turc ; masca le et engloti.

Ibid. (p. 222) : Hernoul de Beauvais, at the approach of death, takes communion of a bit of grass :

Il a pris un poil d'erbe, si le prist a seignier,
 En sa boche le mist, si le prist a mengier,
 el' non corpus Dei.

Renaus de Montauban (ed. H. Michelant, p. 181) : Richard calls upon his companions to confess to each other and take communion of bits of grass :

Car descendons à terre et si nos confesson
 Et des peus de cele herbe nos accommenion.
 L'uns soit confes à l'autre, quant prestre n'i avon,
 Et die ses pechiés par bone entencion.

Gaufrey (ed. Guessard et Chabaille, v. 573) : a badly wounded knight met by Gaufrey took communion of three bits of grass :

Puis a pris .III. peus d'herbe pour aquemuneison.

Galien. Cf. Gautier, *Les épopées françaises*, 2nd ed., vol. III, p. 324 f., where are cited two prose passages of the Galien story, relating the death of Oliver, Galien's father. Roland is made to give three bits of grass to Oliver by way of communion.

The first passage reads : “Adone troubla la veue à Olivier.

Se print Roland troys brains d'erbe et la comincha (*sic*), et en cette fasson l'âme se departit d'Olivier."

The other says : "Adonc Olivier le (*i. e.*, Galien) commanda à Dieu, et la veue luy alla troubler, et luy partit l'âme du corps. Et Roland print trois brins d'herbe et la commença" (*sic*).

Redactions of the *Chanson de Roland*:

Lyons redaction (cf. Gautier, *Chanson de Roland*, 18th ed., 1884, p. 190, note) : Roland gives three bits of grass to Oliver :

Trois poiz a pris de l'erbe verdoiant.
Li ange Dieu i descendant à tant ;
L'arme de lui emportent en chantant.

Roman de Roncevaux (laisse cxcv ; cf. *La Chanson de Roland et le Roman de Roncevaux*, ed. F. Michel, p. 224) : Oliver, now dying, takes three bits of grass :

iiij peuls a prins de l'erbe verdoiant,
En l'onnor Deu les usa maintenant.

Floriant et Florete (ed. F. Michel, v. 345f.) : King Elyadus, having received a death wound from his steward Maragoz, while out hunting, takes three bits of grass :

Puis a .iii. pois de l'erbe pris,
Seigniez et en sa bouche mis
En lieu de Corpus Domini.

Geffrei Gaimar, *Estorie des Engles* (ed. T. Wright, p. 221). King William Rufus, mortally wounded while out hunting in the New Forest, is made by one of his hunters to take some herbs with all their flowers :

Li reis chai,
Par quatre faiz s'est escriez,
Le corpus Domini ad demandez ;
Mès il ne fu ki li donast,
Loinz de muster ert en un wast.
Et nepurquant un veneur
Prist des herbes od tut la flur,
Un poi en fist al rei manger,
Issi le quidat acomenger.
En Deu est ȝo, e estre deit ;
Il aveit pris pain beneit
Le dimaigne de devant,
ȝo li deit estre bon guarant.¹

¹ Cf. Rev. W. Sylvester, *The Dublin Review*, vol. 121, p. 91f. : "The ordinary accounts of the Red King's burial in Winchester Cathedral state,

Quite in accord with these Old French examples is one in the Provençal epic, *Daurel et Beton* (ed. P. Meyer, v. 426 f.): Duke Beuve d'Antone in vain asks his assassin Gui to give him communion of foliage :

E lo franx dux s'es vas lui regardatz,
E junh las mas : “Companh, si a vos platz,
Ab de la fuelha e vos me cumergas.”
“Per Dieu !” dit Guis, “de follia parlas !
More vos tost, per o trop o tarzas.”

It is a significant fact that in the majority of the cases mentioned, *three* bits of grass, or *three* leaves of a tree constitute the matter of the communion. In one of the cases in *Les Chétifs*—precisely the incident on which the Spanish example in the *Gran Conquista* must rest,¹—a single piece of grass plucked by the administering knight is by him expressly divided into three parts. The reason of the im-

as every one knows, that the body of the tyrant was ‘buried as the corpse of a wild beast, without funeral rites er weeping eyes’ (S. R. Gardiner, *Student's History*, I, 122, London, 1894). Gaimar, on the other hand, speaks of the celebration of many masses and of an unusually stately service. Professor Freeman refuses credence to the reported ceremonial in his elaborate comparison of the contemporary narratives; and it is, therefore, the more noteworthy that he raises not the slightest doubt as to the veracity of the king’s reception of symbolic communion. ‘Such a strange kind of figure,’ he writes indeed, ‘of the most solemn act of Christian worship was not unknown;’ and he recalls, in a note, a striking passage from Dr. Lingard’s description of the battle of Azincourt in 1415: ‘At the same moment Sir Thomas Erpingham threw his warder into the air; and the men, falling on their knees, bit the ground, arose, shouted, and ran towards the enemy. This singular custom (Dr. Lingard adds in a note) had been introduced by the peasants of Flanders before the great victory which they gained over the French cavalry at Courtray in 1302. A priest stood in front of the army, holding the consecrated host in his hand; and each man, kneeling down, took a particle of earth in his mouth, as a sign of his desire and an acknowledgment of his unworthiness, to receive the sacrament’’ (Dr. Lingard, *History of England*, 3d ed., vol. v, p. 27; E. A. Freeman, *The Reign of William Rufus*, Oxford, 1882, vol. II, p. 331).

¹Cf. H. Pigeonneau, *Le Cycle de la Croisade* (Saint-Cloud, 1877), p. 249; G. Paris, *Romania*, xvii, 525 ff.

portance thus given to the number three is, doubtless, that stated in the *Gran Conquista*: the priest usually divides the host into three parts when consecrating God's body on the altar, and the practice is piously imitated in the symbolical communion. It is to be noted that in the *Floriant et Florete* the communicant receives the three pieces of grass *in lieu of* the body of God, and that in the *Raoul de Cambrai* this form of communion is resorted to *because no priest is there*. Obviously, the Old French poets had clearly in mind the symbolical or makeshift nature of the ceremony which they thus described in their works.

Earth alone figured as the matter of the communion in Spain, and we shall see that that same substance is the only one employed in Germany and Italy. Why was grass or foliage only used in the French cases? One is tempted to suppose that earth was used originally in France, too, and that the other substances were substituted for it as being more palatable. There is no evidence, however, upon which to base such a supposition, and, besides, the relation between earth and certain of its vegetable off-shoots is close enough to warrant us in believing that a mythological or symbolical sense could be as easily and naturally attached to the one as to the other. A subject of no less interest is the determination of the antiquity of the custom in France. In this connection all that we can safely do is to place it at least as early as the middle of the 12th century, when Gaimar wrote his quasi-historical work. The *Chanson d'Antioche* has been appealed to as taking the custom back to the time of the first Crusade, for that poem, concerned with the capture of Antioch (1098), makes use of the three bits of grass.¹ But, while it is true that the *Chanson d'Antioche* contains much sober history and fact, and is in many respects a contempo-

¹Cf. *The Dublin Review*, vol. 121, p. 92.

rary document,¹ it would be venturesome to say that its record of the symbolical communion represents a fact that occurred on Oriental territory at the end of the 11th century; for the work is not merely a rhymed chronicle, in the form in which we have it, but shows in no slight degree the workings of poetical fancy. It must be borne in mind that the primitive form of the *Chanson d'Antioche* is lost, and we possess it only in a redaction of the reign of Philippe Auguste.¹ So it is, therefore, that a theory of an Oriental origin of the symbolical custom, and its transportation to France during the time of the Crusades,—a theory which one might possibly conceive—hardly finds support in the *Chanson d'Antioche*. In France itself the oldest forms of the epic as illustrated by the *Chanson de Roland* show no acquaintance with the symbolical communion, but it already appears in the Paris and Lyons manuscripts of one of the two rhymed redactions of the *Roland* (*i. e.*, the redactions

¹Cf. G. Paris, *La littérature française au moyen âge* (Paris, 1890, p. 49) : apropos of the cycle of crusading poems, “ils n’avaient guère de la poésie que la forme, au fond ils étaient de l’histoire. . . . A cet élément historique s’est jointe, dans les poèmes que nous avons, l’invention pure et simple des jongleurs français.” With regard to these same crusading epics, C. Nyrop, *Storia dell’epopea francese* (trans. by E. Gorra, Turin, 1888), p. 215, remarks: “i più antichi trattano di personaggi contemporanei e delle loro azioni, e devonsi perciò piuttosto considerare come una specie di cronache rimate, le quali—dentro certi limiti—possono pretendere ad autorità storica. Inoltre essi non sono usciti dal popolo, non si fondono sopra qualche tradizione popolare, ma sono invece composti da poeti, che si tengono oltremodo stretti agli avvenimenti. Questo vale però soltanto per i due primi poemi, ‘‘Antioche’’ e ‘‘Jérusalem,’’ considerati però nella loro forma più antica, perchè più tardi furono rimaneggiati e ampliati con l’aggiunta di leggende d’ogni maniera.” It is precisely because we have not the primitive forms of these poems that it is dangerous to draw any conclusion from them with respect to such a question as that involved in the presence of the symbolical communion in one of them. Yet the first Crusade antedates the custom.

²Cf. Nyrop, *l. c.*, p. 419; Gautier, *Bibliographie des Chansons de geste* (Paris, 1897), p. 56; H. Pigeonneau, *Le cycle de la Croisade* (Saint-Cloud, 1877), p. 144.

called the *Roman de Roncevaux*). If it be an original trait of the common source of these two redactions, it is thereby dated at least as early as the beginning of the last third of the 12th century, the period to which, according to G. Paris,¹ that common source belongs. But Gaimar's reference antedates that.

THE GERMAN INSTANCES.

The German cases seem no older than the 13th century. We may begin our consideration of them with the

Meier Helmbrecht (cf. H. Lambel, *Erzählungen und Schwänke*, 2nd ed., Leipzig, 1883, p. 130 ff.): Meier Helmbrecht, now blind, falls into the hands of some woodchoppers, who prepare to hang him, in accordance with his just deserts, but previously allow him to make his confession, after which one of them gives him a *bit of earth* "as aid against Hell-fire : "

1902. si liezen in sine bihete
 den müeding dō sprechen.
 einer begunde brechen
 ein brosamen von der erden.
 dem vil gar unwerden
 gap er si z'einer stiuwer
 für daz hellefiuwer,
 und hiengen in an einen boum.

Eckenliet (*Deutsches Heldenbuch*, v, Berlin, 1870, p. 219 ff.): Ecke meets with a sorely wounded man, Helperich von Lüne, whom Dietrich had stricken down along with three others. Helperich asks Ecke to put some earth into his mouth for the salvation of his soul :

58. ést umb min leben gar dâ hin,
 der töt hât mich ergangen.
 gënt mir der erde in minen munt
 wan durch die gotes ère :
 so wirt gëne gote min sèle gesunt. . . .
 durch got lant mich geruownen.
 ich mac niht leben më.

Rabenschlacht (*Deutsches Heldenbuch*, ii, Berlin, 1866, p. 262) : Witege and Diether (Dietrich) have been fighting and the former has given

¹ Paris, *La littérature française au moyen âge*, 2nd ed., p. 61.

Diether a fatal blow. Diether takes earth from the ground and puts it into his mouth as our Lord's sacrifice :

457. Dem edeln künoge werde
diu craft gar besleif.
nider zuo der erde
mit beiden handen er dō greif
und bót si zuo dem munde
zuo unsers herren opher sā ze stunde.

Wolfdietrich (cited by Wackernagel, *Zeitschrift f. deutsches Alterthum*, VI, 289; cf. *Deutsches Heldenbuch*, III, 299) : several take earth from the ground and put it into their mouths as our Lord's sacrifice :

do griffen sy zw der erden zuo der selben stundt,
ze vnsers herren opfer namen sy dy erd jn den mundt.¹

To these cases indicated by Wackernagel reference is also made by H. Lambel in his edition of the *Meier Helmbrecht*, p. 201, where he gives the following note :—“Die Erde wurde im christlichen Mittelalter zum Symbol des Leibes Christi. In einer Wiener Handschrift (N. 121, 9. Jahrh.) der *Origenes* des Isidorus heiszt es in einer den Ausgaben fehlenden Stelle, die mir mein Freund J. A. Schmidt nachwies, XIV (= XII der Ks.; vgl. Endlicher Catal., I, 289), I, 3 (Schluss nach *ventis*; Bl. 1^a fg.) ; *terra enim mystice plures significationes habet . . . aliquando carnem domini salvatoris significat*. Daraus erklärt sich der Glaube, dasz Sterbende, denen kein Priester zur Seite steht, in einem Krümchen Erde (auch Brot oder Gras, Ulrich von Liechtenstein, Frauend. 544, I; Garin mhd. Wb., I, 263), nachdem sie entweder einem anwesenden Laien, wie hier [*i. e.*, in the *Meier Helmbrecht*] und in Wolfram's Wh. 65, 10; 69, II (vgl. Reinaert 1439 fg., Reinke 1378 fg.), oder im Fall sie ganz allein sind, Gott gebeichtet haben (Liechtenstein a. a. o.), den Leichnam Christi empfangen können ; vgl. Wolfd. B.

¹ In the *Deutsches Heldenbuch*, III, 299, the lines read :

dō griffen si zer erden an der selben stundt :
ze unsers hérren opfer námens die erden in den munt.

912, 3, 4 (D. H. B., III, 299), Rabenschl. 457, 3 fg. (D. H. B., II, 262); Eckenlied 58, 7 fg. (D. H. B., V, 229). Den Glauben bestätigt auch Berthold von Regensburg, aber dagegen polemisierend 309, 9–16 (ed. Pfeiffer); vgl. Zeitschrift, VI, 288.” If the Latin passage found in the Vienna ms. of the *Origines* is itself of the 9th century, it certainly provides very important testimony to the antiquity of the custom of symbolizing the body of Christ by earth. The two cases of lay confession, alluded to by Lambel, occur in the beast epic; the one in Willem’s Dutch work *Reinaert* (cf. ed. E. Martin, Paderborn, 1874, vv. 1433 ff.) and the other in the Low German *Reinke de Vos* (ed. F. Prien, Halle, 1887, p. 54). In the *Reinaert*, the Fox, who is on his way to the court to answer for his misdeeds, makes confession to the Badger, because no priest is at hand :

1433. lieve neve ic wille gaen
 (nu hoort mine redene saen)
 te biechten hier tote di :
 hier nes ander pape bi.

He begins his confession thus :

1451. confiteor pater mater,
 dat ic den otter ende den cater
 ende allen dieren hebbe mesdaen.

This has somewhat the aspect of a travesty, and as such is, of course, in consonance with the rascally character of Reynard. In general, however, the cases of lay confession and lay communion are treated in mediaeval literature as very serious matters. The situation in the *Reinke de Vos* parallels that in the *Reinaert*.

Of the documents which Lambel mentions as containing instances of lay communion, the *Garin* and the *Willehalm* (Wolfram’s version of the *Aliscans*, cf. the 4th ed. of Wolfram von Eschenbach’s works by K. Lachmann, Berlin, 1879, p. 423 ff.) simply repeat the situation in their Old

French originals. The case in Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauendienst*, mentioned by both Wackernagel and Lambel, involves, seemingly, the use, not of earth, or of vegetable matter, or of a consecrated host, but merely of bread found on the spot. According to the ostensibly autobiographical account, Ulrich has been enticed out of his stronghold by his enemies, Pilgerin and Weinolt, who imprison him and threaten him with death on the morrow. All night he sorrows, and in the morning, believing death imminent, he looks about for a piece of bread. He discovers a crumb (*brōsem*), and this he consumes, as the body of him from whom nothing is hidden, after first bewailing his sins; cf. *Ulrich von Liechtenstein*, herausgegeben von K. Lachmann (Berlin, 1841), *Vrouwen Dienest*, p. 543 f.:

Die naht leit ich vil michel nöt . . .
 Så dô der ander tac erschein,
 dô wart ich kürzlich des enein,
 sit daz ich müeste ligen tôt,
 daz ich versuoht ob iender bröt
 laege da ich gevangen lac :
 vil sere ich daz ze suochen pflac.
ein brōsem ich dâ ligende vant :
 die huob ich weinende úf zehant.
 Dâ mit sô kniet ich úf diu kneie
 und klaget die mñnen sünd'e hie
 dem den verheln mac niemen niht
 und der in elliu herze siht.
 sîn lichnam ich dô weinent nam,
 mit triwen, als mir daz gezam.

That in Germany the practice was really current among the people in the 13th century is made clear by the way in which the sturdy preacher, Berthold von Regensburg, assailed it in some of his sermons (cf. *Berthold von Regensburg. Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Predigten*. von F. Pfeiffer: 2 vols., Vienna, 1862 and 1880). Thus he discourses in the sermon on “The Seven Holy Things” (*Von den siben Heilikeiten*,

l. c., I, 303): "Then says some one or other in the open field, when he is about to be hanged or otherwise deprived of life, and has no chance of escape, then he says: 'Alas! that I may receive our Lord, give me a crumb in my mouth, or a bit of earth, if you have nothing else,' and he thinks that he thereby receives God's body. No, not at all! Bread is bread, earth is earth, God's body is God's body. If he eats a lot of bread or earth, he is only the heavier on the gallows." Berthold repeats his attack in quite similar terms in the sermon on "The Seven Medicines" (*Von den sieben erzenien*, *l. c.*, II, 89).

It is to be observed that Berthold specifies only bread and earth: he says nothing of grass or foliage; and the strictly Germanic cases which we have examined speak only of earth (as they do in four instances) or of bread (as in one).¹ Berthold, too, is the only cleric who seems ever to have spoken out against a custom which the Church might have been expected to view with much suspicion, if not actually to condemn it. Lay administration of the most august of sacraments—if in lay hands the ceremony could continue to be called a sacramental one—would certainly call for control by the ecclesiastical authorities. In point of fact, the custom in question, being a purely symbolical one, did not run counter to the doctrine of Transubstantiation, and the rulers of the Church do not appear to have deemed it an abuse calling for restriction. It is interesting here to

¹The use of bread in the lay form of communion probably savored in general of mere superstition or of heresy. Cf. this reference to an heretical use in Cœsarius Heisterbacensis, *Illustrium Miraculorum et Historiarum Memorabilium Lib. XII* (Cologne, 1599: *Liber Quintus, De Daemonibus*, ch. xix, p. 347): "Nam quidam Abbas Hispanus ordinis nostri per nos transiens, qui cum episcopo et ecclesiarum praelatis eiusdem heretici errores damnauit, eum dixisse referebat, quod quilibet in mensa sua, et de pane suo quo vesceretur, confidere posset corpus Christi. Erat autem idem maledictus faber ferrarius."

quote the view of a modern ecclesiastic well acquainted with the French mediæval custom. “In barren waste or forest path,” says the Rev. W. Sylvester,¹ “far from parish church or abbey choir, the dying man turned to his need of the last sacraments. Ministers were there none. Extreme unction was impossible. There was no soft touch of holy oils. Yet confession and spiritual communion were within the knight’s grasp and he seized them. God’s appointed minister lacking, the moribund confessed his sins in the squire’s ear. . . . Then followed the substitute for communion. Communion with the Sacred Host could not be received, but spiritual communion was possible. And, as we to-day, the dying man spoke his prayer of belief, hope, adoration and love, ere yielding up his soul. Still, with that quaint literalness upholding so much of the real, intense faith of the Middle Ages—to make, so to say, his communion more real to himself—the knight plucked three blades of grass and ate them. It was no mere form. ‘Nothing,’ as Mr. Lilly says (*Chapters in European History*, I, 158, London, 1886), ‘was a mere form in the Middle Ages.’ It was no vulgar superstition. ‘The first fact about the age was its faith, not its superstition’ (*Ibid.*, I, 172). The culling and the consumption of the blades of grass was the simple, loving avowal of a believing soul, that, far from priest and altar, it had done what it could.”

THE ITALIAN EXAMPLES.

Three leading instances of the occurrence of symbolical communion are on record in Italian literature, and, as in Spain and Germany, earth is the species of the communion. Wackernagel has already called attention to the case in Ser

¹ *The Dublin Review*, 121, p. 82.

Giovanni Fiorentino's *Pecorone* (c. 1378 ; cf. ed. of Milan, 1804, in the *Classici italiani*, I, 145-6). There, in the Giornata settima, novella seconda, is recounted the fate of a man put to death in the room in which he was captured. Raising his hands to Heaven, he bent down, took earth, and put it into his mouth :

“alzò le mani al cielo, e poi si chinò e prese della terra e misela in bocca, e poi si mise le mani agli occhi per non vedere la morte sua e chinò il capo alla terra.”

The writer does not dwell upon the reason for taking the earth, its symbolical significance ; but this was probably clear to a reader of Ser Giovanni's time.

In the other two cases, the symbolical value of the process is brought out distinctly. The first occurs in the *Morgante* of Luigi Pulci ; the second is in a very realistic document, the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, and attests the survival of the belief—perhaps as a mere soldier's superstition—as late as the 16th century.

The *Morgante* passage (Canto XXVII, stz. 147 ; for the preliminary confession cf. stz. 116) pictures the death of Roland in the pass of Roncesvalles. He has made his confession to Archbishop Turpin, and it is this prelate who bids him take earth as communion :¹

- 147 (7) : E perchè Iddio nel ciel ti benedica,
Piglia la terra, la tua madre antica,
148 (1) : Però che Iddio Adam plasmoe di questa,
Sì che e' ti basta per comunione.

We perceive that Turpin advances a reason why earth may suffice for this symbolical communion, viz., “God made Adam of this earth,” i. e., the human race is itself of earth.

¹Cf. the instance in the Spanish *Poema de Alfonso XI* and that related by Lingard.

Roland follows the bidding of Turpin, and, partaking of the earth, dies :

153 (6) : E finalmente, la testa inclinata,
Presse la terra, come gli fu detto,
E l'anima spirò del casto petto.

Much of the matter treated in the *Morgante* is of ultimate French origin, as is the case with the bulk of the chivalrous, romantic matter found in Italy. We have seen that in the Old French redaction of the *Chanson de Roland* and in the Old French *Galien*, Oliver takes three bits of grass as communion before dying. If the Italian tradition in the *Morgante* is at all connected therewith, why the change from grass to earth?¹ The attaching of the death ceremony to Roland, rather than Oliver, is easily intelligible in the Italian poem, in which Oliver is a subordinate figure.

The passage in the *Vita di Benvenuto Cellini* appertains to the siege of Rome in 1527 (cf. ed. by O. Bacci, Florence, 1901, section xxxv). Cellini was among those defending the Castel S. Angelo for Pope Clement, and one day he was laid low by a portion of the wall which a cannon ball from without caused to topple over upon him. Coming to his senses, he started to speak, but could not, as he tells us, “because some fools of soldiers had filled my mouth with earth, thinking that thereby they had given me communion, whereas they had rather excommunicated me, because I could not recover myself, for this earth gave me much more trouble than the shock of the blow” (*Volendo cominciare a*

¹ The *Pseudo-Turpin* has a Roland death-scene, of course, but one in which there is no necessity for the symbolical communion. Cf. this passage: “Orlando had that morning received the blessed Eucharist and confessed his sins before he went to battle, this being the custom with all the warriors at that time, for which purpose many bishops and monks attended the army to give them absolution” (*History of Charles the Great and Orlando Ascribed to Archbishop Turpin translated from the Latin, etc.*, London, 1812, I, 43-4).

parlare, non potevo, perchè certi sciocchi soldatelli mi avevano pieno la bocca di terra, parendo loro con quella di avermi dato la comunione, con la quale loro più presto mi avevano scomunicato, perchè non mi potevo riavere, dandomi questa terra più noia assai che la percossa).

It is now meet to recur to the subject of possible relations between the mediæval custom and the modern sayings *mordre la poudre* (*poussière*), *ins Gras beiszen*, *bite the dust* (*ground*), etc. It is surely a striking coincidence that *dust* (*ground*) and *grass* should figure in these expressions, which in their strong sense mean *to die*, and should figure, likewise, in the symbolical form of communion which we have been investigating, a ceremony to which resort was had only when death seemed imminent. But in so far as our researches permit us to pronounce a judgment, we can only say that the case is one of pure coincidence. Certainly it seems well-nigh impossible to establish any direct connection between the sayings and the custom. J. W. Wolf and Zingerle doubted the connection, and Zingerle pointed out analogous sayings in Greek and Latin, which, of course, antedate the mediæval custom, and, furthermore, seem themselves not to have had any symbolical significance.

On the whole, it seems probable that *to bite the dust*, *mordre la poudre* (*poussière*), *ins Gras beiszen*, and kindred expressions are of rather recent origin within the modern languages, and arose through literary imitation of the Greek and Latin use of similar terms.

For French, Littré (*Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Paris, 1883) gives *mordre la poudre*, *la poussière*, *la terre* as meaning “*être tué dans un combat*.” He illustrates *mordre la terre* by Corneille, *Médée*, iv, 3 :

Dont la main . . .
 Met Égée en prison et son orgueil à bas,
 Et fait *mordre la terre* à ses meilleurs soldats.

Mordre la poudre by Racine, *Thébaïde*, I, 3:

J'ai fait *mordre la poudre* à ces audacieux.

Mordre la poussière by Malherbe :

L'orgueil à qui tu fis *mordre la poussière* de Coutras.

Mordre la poussière by Voltaire, *Henriade*, VII :

Nesle, Clermont, d'Angenne ont *mordu la poussière*.

From Montaigne he quotes this example of *mordre la terre*: “*Il faut leur faire baisser la tête et mordre la terre sous l'auctorité*,” which seems to signify submission to authority simply, and not necessarily meeting with death. Moreover, the Darmesteter, Hatzfeld and Thomas, *Dictionnaire générale de la langue française* (Paris, 1890–1900) glosses *mordre la terre, la poussière* by “être terrassé,” and adduces therefore the example from Corneille's *Médée* already quoted by Littré as implying the fatal outcome. There can be little doubt that the idea of “being brought to the ground,” “defeated,” “humiliated” is as easily associated with the French expressions as the stronger sense of “meeting death.” It is likely that the latter was the earlier force of the French expression, and that the other sense represents a natural weakening of it, or one brought about by the influence of such other phrases as *baiser la terre* or *lècher la poussière*. The first of these is interpreted by Littré as meaning “adorer et se soumettre,” and illustrated by passages from *Athalie*, *Esther*, and Delille's *Paradis perdu*: the second, he says, is equivalent to “s'humilier extrêmement” as used by Voltaire, *Dial.*, XXIV, 14: *On a regardé en face l'idole devant laquelle on avait leché la poussière*.

Like phrases occur in the other Romance languages. Thus the Spanish *morder la tierra* is explained by Tolhausen

(*Nuevo Diccionario Español-alemán*, 1888–9) as signifying “ins Gras beiszen, sterben, auf dem Platze bleiben,” and Zerolo (*Diccionario encyclopédico de la lengua castellana*, Paris, 1900) glosses *hacer morder la tierra (el polvo) á uno* with “rendirle, vencerle en la pelea, matándole ó derribándole.” It is to be remarked that Zerolo indicates by the side of the stronger sense “to kill,” the weaker one “to overthrow.”

For Portuguese, Vieira (*Grande Diccionario Portuguez*, 1871–4) quotes *morder a terra*, “succumbir em uma luta, caír morto em batalha,” and Michaelis (*A New Dictionary of the Portuguese and English Languages*, Leipzig, 1893) has *morder a terra (a areia)*, “to bite the ground or dust, to lick the dust, to die, to be killed.” Whether the expressions are old or new is not apparent from the Spanish and Portuguese dictionaries; nor do the Italian dictionaries bring the fact out clearly. Tommaseo (*Dizionario della lingua italiana*, 1869) gives *far mordere la polvere, il terreno*, “Stendere a terra morto o quasi morto,” and illustrates with a passage from a translation of the *Aeneid*, xi, 747: *Giacque morendo, e colla bocca una volta morse la terra*; and Petrocchi (*Novo Dizionario Universale della lingua italiana*, Milan, 1903) has *Far morder la polvere*, “Vincere, Abbatter il nemico :” *Morder la polvere* (e poetic. *la polve*), “Esser vinti.”

Before passing away from the Romance examples of the sayings, we should note that French, which offers no instance of the partaking of earth by way of communion, makes use only of words for *earth* or *dust* (*terre, poudre, poussière*) in the metaphorical expressions.

For German, J. Grimm and W. Grimm (*Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Leipzig, 1854) give *sub verbo* “beiszen :” *in das gras, in (sic) die erde beiszen*, “mordre la poussière, von menschen gesagt, sterben müszen, wie kraut, erde und staub oft einander

vertreten.” The earliest example that they quote is from Opitz (of the first half of the 17th century):

Solt ich, O Marspiter, ins gras gebissen haben (“todd sein”).

Beiszen die erde they attest by an example from Friedrich Stolberg (latter part of the 18th century):

Sinken nieder in staub und sterbend beiszen die erde.

The Grimms also list, *s. v. erde* and *käuen* (*kauen*) the phrase *die erde kauen*, “sterben,” but with no illustrations. There is, to be sure, another German phrase of similar import, *die Erde küssen*. To this the Grimms (*s. v. küssen*) assign both the strong sense of “meeting death” and the weaker one of “falling wounded, whether so or not.” They illustrate both senses, but with nothing earlier than the 17th century. That the translations of Homer and other ancient classics, such as those made by Voss (1751–1826), have rendered “to bite the dust” (*den Staub knirschen*, cf. Voss, *Iliad*, xix, 61) and like phrases common in literary German since the 18th century need hardly be said. But the rise of *ins Gras beiszen* remains shrouded in darkness. It is apparently a popular rather than a literary expression. Does it antedate all possible humanistic and classic influence?

Murray’s *New English Dictionary* quotes, *s. v. bite*, *To bite the dust, ground, sand, etc.*, and these are glossed “to fall in death, to die.” The earliest instance cited is of 1771, and occurs in Gray’s *Poems*, Ode viii, “Soon a king shall bite the ground.” *To bite the dust* is illustrated from Bryant’s *Iliad*, I, ii, 55,

“May his fellow warriors
Fall round him to the earth and bite the dust.”

S. v. dust, Murray records the weaker sense, “to fall to the ground; especially to fall wounded or slain.” Of course the illustrations given by Murray are not the earliest; they

are later than the instances which we might quote from Chapman's *Homer*, and Dryden's *Vergil*; cf., for example, Dryden's *Aeneid*, xi, 527-8 :

The plains of Latium run with blood around,
So many valiant heroes bite the ground.

The *Century Dictionary* has *to bite the dust* or *the ground*, "to fall, be thrown or struck down, be vanquished or humbled," which brings out only the weaker force of the terms : the *Standard Dictionary* cites *bite the dust* and *bite the ground* with both the strong and the weak sense, "to fall prostrate ; be vanquished or slain." The development from a stronger to a weaker force might have been aided in English, as we assumed it might have been in French, by the existence of certain other phrases in which *dust* or *ground* occurs. In this connection one thinks of the Biblical "to lick the dust" (cf. "lécher la poussière"), as found in *Psalms* 72, 9, "and his enemies shall lick the dust ;" *Isaiah* 49, 23, "they shall lick up the dust of thy feet" (cf. Vulgate "vultu in terram demisso odorabunt te, et pulverem pedum tuorum lingent"); and in *Micah* 7, 17, "they shall lick the dust like a serpent" (Vulgate "lingent pulverem sicut serpentes"). The *Isaiah* passage is particularly clear as to the weak sense for this phrase. *Ground* occurs in phrases susceptible of a weak sense, such as *to bring to the ground* (Murray, "to cast down, overthrow, overcome, subdue") or *to come (go) to the ground* (Murray, "to be overcome, to perish").

As we have assumed that the modern expressions started as conscious echos of the terms used by writers of classic antiquity, it may not be amiss here to examine some of the classic Latin examples of the phrases.

Forcellini (*Totius Latinitatis Lexicon*, Prato, 1868), s. v. *mordeo*, has the following note : "mordere terram dicuntur,

qui graviter icti, in faciem procumbunt morituri,” and *s. v.* *mando*: “*Ut mordere humum sic et mandere dicuntur, qui vulnere prostrati, proni moriuntur.*” To the cases quoted by him, we add others here.

mordere humum: *Aeneid*, xi, 418,

Procubuit moriens, et *humum* semel ore *momordit*.

mordere (h)arenas or arenam: Ovid, *Meta.*, ix, 60–61,

Tum denique tellus

Pressa genu nostro est ; et *arenas momordit*.

Claudianus, *De bello Getico*, 588 f.,

Ille tamen mandante procul Stilichone citatis

Accelerant equis, Italamque *momordit arenam*.

In Artaud’s Paris (1824) ed. of Claudianus, there is a note on this passage which tallies with the idea of Wolf and Zingerle that the expression *to bite the dust*, etc., indicates the convulsive agonies of death. The editor glosses *Italamque momordit arenam* with “in Italia occisus momordit terram,” and continues: “*id faciebant antiqui, ne sibi morientibus ora prave contorta viderentur.*” He applies the same explanation to *Aeneid*, xi, 418.

mandere humum: *Aeneid*, xi, 668 f.,

Sanguinis ille vomens rivos cadit, atque cruentam

Mandit humum, moriensque suo se in volnere versat.

mandere aequora: Valerius Flaccus, *Argonauticon Libri*, iii, 106,

compressaque mandens

Aequora purpuream singultibus exspuit auram.

Cf. this note of the Paris ed. of 1824: “*compressaque mandens Aequora, campi glebas in quo jacebat mordens.*”

In all these cases the verb *to bite* or *to eat* is used with an object noun denoting *ground*, *sand*, or *surface of the earth* (*humus*, *arena*, *aequor*). Although the dictionaries speak of a phrase *mordere terram* (cf. Forcellini, Harper’s, etc.), no illustration of it is given by them, and it has not come to light in the present search.

No symbolical force seems to attach itself to the Latin cases mentioned ; and the meaning of *mordere humum*, etc.,

may be just what the glossator of the passage in Claudianus said, viz., that the dying man clutches the ground with his teeth as a means of hiding his facial contortions. Or, if we do not care for this explanation based on the supposed stoical nature of the soldier, we may adopt the general one, that the dying man was writhing and contorting his mouth in the agonies of death and biting at what was near him.

Instead of the verbs *to bite, to eat* (*mordere, mandere*), there occur also the verbs *to go to, to seek* (*petere, appetere*), *to catch* (*apprendere*), taking as their object a noun denoting earth (*terram, tellurem, arva*). With such verbs the sense is not necessarily that of *meeting death*:

petere terram: Seneca, *Oedipus* 480,

ore deiecto petiere terram.

The persons on the scene simply prostrate themselves as suppliants at the feet of Bacchus.

Vergil, *Aeneid*, III, 93,

Submissi petimus terram.

However, *petere* (*appetere, apprendere*) *terram* (*tellarem, arva*) may have the strong sense, if accompanied by words involving the tragic outcome:

petere terram: Vergil, *Aeneid*, IX, 489,

Et terram hostilem moriens petit ore cruento.

appetere tellurem: Silius Italicus, *Punicorum liber quintus*, 526-7,

*Labitur infelix, atque appetit ore cruento
Tellurem exspirans.*

Ibid., liber nonus, 383 f.

*Volvitur ille ruens, atque arva hostilia morsu
Appetit, et mortis premit in tellure dolores.*

apprendere tellurem: *Ibid.*, XVII, 264,

Ausoniam extremo tellurem apprendere morsu.

As these verbs are accompanied by *morsu* or *ore*, they are, after all, equivalent to *mordere*; and, of course, they realize in Latin the ὀδὰξ ἔλον and similar Greek phrases.

Petere terram without *ore* or *morsu* is seen in

Seneca : *OEdipus* 340,

terram vulnere afflicti petunt.

Here the tragic sense is conveyed by other modifiers. Finally, we may cite an instance of *tangere solum mento*, in

Horace's *Odes* (*Carmina*, II, vii, 11–12), where the poet speaks of the destruction of his brothers in arms at Philippi :—

Quum fracta virtus, et minaces
Turpe solum tetigere mento.

The *solum tetigere* of this passage has been likened to the Homeric *λάξομαι γαῖαν*.

It must be obvious that the strong or tragic sense is the usual one for these Latin phrases, although some of them occasionally have a weaker force.

Now to recapitulate, at the risk of irksome iteration, we may assert that the symbolical communion by means of earth or grass (leaves) is referred to in the literatures of at least four great lands, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Earth is used for the ceremony in Germany (apart from one case of the employment of bread), in Italy, and in Spain ; in France use is made of grass (leaves). Metaphorical expressions involving the use of words for *dust*, *earth*, and *ground* exist in French, Spanish, Italian and English ; in German the customary—and apparently a popular—expression is *ins Gras beissen*, although *die Erde kauen* (*küssen*, etc.) is found also. Thus the metaphorical expressions contain terms denoting the same objects that figure in the symbolical communion ; geographically, however, the equivalence is not exact, since German employs chiefly the word for *grass* in the metaphor, and shows normally the word for *earth* in the symbolical communion ; whereas France knows only *grass* (*leaves*) for the symbolical communion and employs only *earth* (*dust*, etc.) in the metaphor.

Despite the concordance of the terms of the metaphor and the elements of the symbolical communion, it seems impossible to connect the modern expressions with the mediæval custom. It looks as though the expressions are of relatively recent origin in the modern languages, and came into being through literary imitation of phrases in the Greek and Latin classics, for Greek and Latin used terms signifying "to bite the ground, earth, or sand," generally with the meaning "to meet death." There appears, nevertheless, to be no Greek or Latin analogue for the German phrase, "ins Gras beissen." This may have arisen as a very natural term for describing a fact often witnessed, the convulsive death agony of a wounded soldier, biting at the object nearest him in the field, *i. e.*, grass. It is as such a descriptive term that the expressions in Greek and Latin may have arisen.

There is a certain elasticity of sense possible in the modern phrases *to bite the dust, ground*, etc. Perhaps their original force was that which the ancient classical phrases appear to have possessed as their primary one, viz., "meeting one's death;" the subsidiary sense, "to be brought to the ground, to be overthrown, to be humiliated," may be a natural weakening in metaphorical use or may be due to a contamination with other phrases containing *dust, ground*, etc.

No attempt has been made here to determine whether in the mediæval symbolical communion by means of earth there survived a pagan idea of the mythological importance of earth. Pulci, in obedience to the introspective and rationalizing spirit of the Renaissance, suggested an explanation, which may or may not be original with him. God made man of earth; in lieu of God's body man can partake of nothing better in the hour of his dire need. Man came of mother Earth: after the last sad scene to mother Earth he returns.

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